

BY THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PLEASE LOOK AFTER MOM*

I WENT TO SEE MY FATHER



A Novel

KYUNG-SOOK SHIN

TRANSLATED BY ANTON HUR

ASTRA HOUSE

READING GROUP GUIDE

BOOK SUMMARY

Two years after losing her daughter in a tragic accident, Hon finally returns to her home in the Korean countryside to take care of her father. At first, her father appears withdrawn and fragile, an aging man, awkward but kind around his own daughter. Then, after stumbling upon a chest of letters, Hon discovers the truth of her father's past and reconstructs her family history.

Consumed with her own grief, Hon has been blind to her father's vulnerability and her family's fragility. Unraveling secret after secret, Hon grows closer to her father, who proves to be more complex than she ever gave him credit for. After living through one of the most tumultuous times in Korean history, her father's life spiraled after the civil war. Now, after years of emotional isolation, Hon learns the whole truth, from her father's affair and involvement in a religious sect, to the dynamic lives of her siblings, to her family's financial hardships.

What Hon uncovers about her father builds toward her understanding of the great scope of his sacrifice and heroism, and of his generation. More than just the portrait of a single man, *I Went to See My Father* opens a window onto humankind, family, loss, and war.

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

- 1** The book opens as Hon returns to her village to take care of her aging father. He is a bit of a mystery to her and to the reader, as is so often the case with his generation. What is Hon's opinion of her father at the beginning of the book and when does that start to change?
- 2** Over the course of the novel, Hon makes a number of surprising discoveries about her Father, about his past and his present life. How does our image of him evolve as she makes these discoveries, and how does this affect her own feelings about the choices she made in her life?
- 3** The relationship between parents and children is a recurring theme in several of Shin's novels. Here, even as she starts to uncover the truth about her father, Hon is still grieving the sudden death of her daughter. How do these two threads come together over the course of the book?
- 4** Shin employs many different narrative styles—from phone calls, letters and text messages to first-person stream of consciousness, monologue, and dialogue. What effect do these tone shifts have on the flow of the novel? How do they help convey the sense that this is a journey of discovery, an investigation?

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

- 5 One of Father's defining traits that emerge is that he is determined to honor his debts—to Oong, Mr. Nakcheon, the eatery owner in Seoul during the student protests, Park Muleung, and so on. Why does Father hide these stories from his family and how does his sense of honor and secrecy affect their perception of him?
- 6 Food plays a central role in the novel and cooking is one of the many ways Hon takes care of Father in her mother's absence. And yet he often uses food to turn the tables on her and assert his independence. How does Shin use food both as a symbol of love and of power?
- 7 Hon has several siblings who all have strong views about how their parents should be cared for. How does the relationship with her siblings contribute to or interfere with Hon's efforts to reconnect with and understand their father?
- 8 In a starred review, *Booklist* observes that "Shin masterfully glides between quotidian details and astounding feats of survival." How does this combination of the quotidian and astounding ultimately allow for a full understanding of Father?

PRAISE FOR *I WENT TO SEE MY FATHER*

“Shin successfully crafts yet another beautifully presented and heart-rending tale, giving readers much to ponder. Not to be missed, it will appeal not just to fans of *Please Look After Mom* but to anyone who enjoys strong, introspective storytelling; also a good candidate for book groups.”

—Shirley Quan, *Library Journal* (starred review)

“[An] entrancing, subtly insightful novel . . . *I Went to See My Father* is one of the most fair and balanced treatments I’ve seen of the estrangement that can accompany growing up. This novel, in excellent translation by Anton Hur, is a well-crafted work of realist fiction that explores the power of communication to bring families to a point of greater understanding. . . . The way Kyung-Sook Shin draws characters, revealing them layer by nuanced layer, is a marvel. How fortunate we are to have this translation by Anton Hur, providing English-speaking audiences access to the talents of one of South Korea’s most lauded contemporary authors.”

—David Vogel, *Words Without Borders*

“What begins as a family melodrama becomes a fascinating piece of historical fiction . . . Shin’s profound and passionate love for her home country and its traditions is manifest.”

—Douglas MacLeod, *On the Seawall*

“[Comprising] quiet, tender exchanges between father and daughter . . . [*I Went to See My Father*] is a slow and deeply interior novel, dense with memories.”

—Jung Yun, *The Washington Post*

“Touching . . . Like life itself, this digressive meditation alternates from moments of dullness to startling beauty.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Once more, Shin masterfully glides between quotidian details and astounding feats of survival revealed through multiple voices (older brothers, their mother, a wartime friend) and formats (letters, recordings, long chat messages) to create another universally empathic masterpiece.”

—Terry Hong, *Booklist* (starred review)

“Gentle yet piercing . . . [is a] sensitively crafted family portrait that’s both specific and universal and, above all, humane.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“This is one you’ll definitely want to put on your literary map.”

—Erin Kodicek, *Amazon Book Review*

MORE PRAISE

“Viewers and readers of Korean dramas and novels love a bit of teary nostalgia, and Shin provides it here in spades, and does a good job of it, too. . . . Readers who enjoyed *Please Look After Mom* will find a lot to like here. *I Went to See My Father* is an interesting work looking at the life of a man who lived through one of the most turbulent periods of Korea’s history, as well as a reminder to the young (and not so young) that older people, our parents and grandparents, lived lives of their own, and have stories that are well worth listening to.”

—Tony Malone, *Tony’s Reading List*

“This is a book which reminds us that we all suffer from the same wounds, that no individual is free from the pains of their geography and that the greatest losses can only be healed where they all begin. Shin, once again, brings the unique history of a distant land into our homes and masterfully catches our hearts from the core, from the familiar bond of a child and a father.”

—Defne Suman, author of *The Silence of Scheherazade* and *At the Breakfast Table*

“A book that makes you hurt all over, and yet smile at the same time. A book where the experience being shared is so immediately palpable, so universal yet Korean, and beautiful and powerful at the same time.”

—Kim Hyesoon, award-winning author of *Autobiography of Death*

“Kyung-Sook Shin is the writer who made me into a writer. Reading her novel *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* made me discover a loneliness and unsettledness inside me that I didn’t know existed, and thus comforted me on a sincere level. *I Went to See My Father* features the author’s hallmark emotional richness combined with a precision of language that pierces the soul. *I Went to See My Father* shows us an entire generation that suffered through war, in the single character of a father, a modest cattle farmer. Just as Shin’s *Please Look After Mom* gives a voice to the forgotten mother, this novel vividly shows the father as a figure whom we often overlook. Through a narrative so true as to be almost autobiographical, Shin guides us on a journey of heartache to literary catharsis.”

—Sang Young Park, author of *Love in the Big City*

“An insightful contemplation of memory and connectedness between family members. Shin threads together a lyrical family drama and the multilayered spectrum of Korean history in a compelling epic. It is not only a story of love and pain between father and daughter, but of how memories can heal tragic wounds and restore damaged relationships. A powerful, elegant, page-turner.”

—J. M. Lee, author of *Broken Summer*

FURTHER READING

Also by Kyung-Sook Shin

Please Look After Mom

Violets

The Court Dancer: A Novel

I'll Be Right There: A Novel

The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness: A Novel

Also translated by Anton Hur

I Want to Die but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki: A Memoir by Baek Sehee

Cursed Bunny: Stories by Bora Chung

Love in the Big City by Sang Young Park

Counterweight: A Novel by Djuna



KYUNG-SOOK SHIN is one of South Korea's most widely read and acclaimed novelists. She has been awarded the Manhae Grand Prize for Literature, the Dong-in Literary Award, the Man Asian Literary Prize, and many others. Shin is the author of eight novels, eight short story collections, and three essay collections, including the *New York Times* bestselling *Please Look After Mom*, which has been published in more than forty countries. She lives in Seoul, Korea.

ANTON HUR was double-longlisted and shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize and has worked on several of Kyung-Sook Shin's books. He lives in Seoul.



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